

DEMOCRACY IN HUGO CHAVEZ'S VENEZUELA: DEVELOPING OR FALTERING DUE TO HIS POLITICS, ACTIVITIES, AND RHETORIC?

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL R. NEAL DAVID
United States Army

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A:

Approved for Public Release.
Distribution is Unlimited.

USAWC CLASS OF 2008

This PRP is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Strategic Studies Degree. The views expressed in this student academic research paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.



U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5050

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 07 MAY 2008		2. REPORT TYPE Program Research Paper		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2007 to 00-00-2008	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Democracy in Hugo Chavez's Venezuela: Developing or Faltering Due to His Politics, Activities, and Rhetoric?				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) R. David				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College ,122 Forbes Ave.,Carlisle,PA,17013-5220				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see attached					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 26	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

The U.S. Army War College is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle State Association of Colleges and Schools, 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, (215) 662-5606. The Commission on Higher Education is an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 07-05-2008		2. REPORT TYPE Program Research Paper		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Democracy in Hugo Chavez's Venezuela: Developing or Faltering Due to His Politics, Activities, and Rhetoric?				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Lieutenant Colonel R. Neal David, USA				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College 122 Forbes Avenue Carlisle, PA 17013				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) CAPT (RET) David W. Willmann Department of Distance Education				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT DISTRIBUTION A: UNLIMITED					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
Since 1999 Hugo Chavez has been serving as the President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. During his reign, Chavez, a member of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, has made many dramatic changes to the nearly fifty year old democracy, including nationalizing several key industries, stripping the judicial branch of a number of powers, limiting free speech, and governing by decree. He also proposed a constitutional amendment to increase the term of the president from six to seven years and to end current term limits, effectively making him "President for Life." In December 2007, the amendments were defeated by a narrow margin. Although he has gained the favor of the poor through increasing access to healthcare, boosting educational opportunities, and reallocating land, many worry that Chavez's "21st Century Socialism" is a return to authoritarianism. This paper examines Chavez's tenure as president and argues that although he has advanced a socialist agenda and has consolidated considerable power, he is not entirely forsaking the basic principles of democracy. In addition, the recent defeat of his constitutional amendments demonstrates that the population is still holding firmly to the ideals of democracy.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Authoritarianism					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)
			UNLIMITED	26	

USAWC PROGRAM RESEARCH PROJECT

**DEMOCRACY IN HUGO CHAVEZ'S VENEZUELA:
DEVELOPING OR FALTERING DUE TO HIS POLITICS, ACTIVITIES, AND
RHETORIC?**

by

Lieutenant Colonel R. Neal David
United States Army

Topic Approved By
Captain (Retired) David W. Willmann

This PRP is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Strategic Studies Degree. The U.S. Army War College is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, (215) 662-5606. The Commission on Higher Education is an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

The views expressed in this student academic research paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

U.S. Army War College
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Lieutenant Colonel R. Neal David

TITLE: Democracy in Hugo Chavez's Venezuela: Developing or Faltering Due to His Politics, Activities, and Rhetoric?

FORMAT: Program Research Project

DATE: 7 May 2008 WORD COUNT: 5,391 PAGES: 26

KEY TERMS: Authoritarianism

CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

Since 1999 Hugo Chavez has been serving as the President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. During his reign, Chavez, a member of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, has made many dramatic changes to the nearly fifty year old democracy, including nationalizing several key industries, stripping the judicial branch of a number of powers, limiting free speech, and governing by decree. He also proposed a constitutional amendment to increase the term of the president from six to seven years and to end current term limits, effectively making him "President for Life." In December 2007, the amendments were defeated by a narrow margin. Although he has gained the favor of the poor through increasing access to healthcare, boosting educational opportunities, and reallocating land, many worry that Chavez's "21st Century Socialism" is a return to authoritarianism. This paper examines Chavez's tenure as president and argues that although he has advanced a socialist agenda and has consolidated considerable power, he is not entirely forsaking the basic principles of democracy. In addition, the recent defeat of his constitutional amendments demonstrates that the population is still holding firmly to the ideals of democracy.

DEMOCRACY IN HUGO CHAVEZ'S VENEZUELA: DEVELOPING OR FALTERING DUE TO HIS POLITICS, ACTIVITIES, AND RHETORIC?

Hugo Rafael Chavez Frias has been serving since 1999 as the sixty-first president of what he convinced voters in a constitutional referendum to rename the ***Bolivarian*** Republic of Venezuela. During his reign, Chavez, a member of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, has made many dramatic changes to the nearly fifty year old democracy, including nationalizing several key industries, stripping the judicial branch of a number of powers, limiting the opposition's free speech, and governing by decree. He also proposed a constitutional amendment to increase the term of the president from six to seven years and to end current term limits, effectively allowing him to become "President for Life." Although he has gained the favor of the majority poor population through increasing access to healthcare, expanding educational opportunities, providing subsidy programs for a number of commodities, and reallocating government and foreign-owned land, many inside and outside of Venezuela worry that Chavez's so-called "21st Century Socialism" is nothing more than a return to the authoritarian rule of yesteryear. This paper examines Chavez's tenure as president and argues that although he has advanced a socialist agenda and has consolidated considerable power, he is not entirely forsaking the basic principles of democracy. In addition, the recent defeat of his constitutional amendments demonstrates that the population is still holding firmly to the ideals of democracy.

Discussion of Democracy and Socialism

Before analyzing the current situation in Venezuela, a brief discussion of *democracy* and *socialism* is essential. The word *democracy* is from the Greek *demokratia*, derived from the words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule). In that context, it refers to the fifth century B.C. political system that existed in some Greek city-states, most notably Athens. To further define democracy, Levinson writes that it is “the freely given consent of the governed to abide by the laws and policies of those agencies whose activities control the life of the community” (2006). In other words, it is a form of government in which the power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving free elections. In its report titled “Democracy in Latin America,” the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) describes democracy as “more than simply a method of deciding who is to rule. It is also a way of building, guaranteeing and broadening freedom, justice, and progress ...” (2004). After the Greek period, discussion and proliferation of democratic ideals stagnated for centuries, but was stimulated in the 1600s when scholars such as Hobbes and Locke began to question the nature and organization of the state. Nonetheless, democracy did not truly flourish until the twentieth century, which saw an explosion of democratic governments (Levinson 2006). By the twenty-first century, approximately one third of the world’s independent countries have some form of democratic government (United Nations Development Programme 2004).

Heilbroner defines *socialism* as “a centrally planned economy in which the government controls all means of production.” He also writes that socialism is “... born of a commitment to remedy the economic and moral defects of capitalism.” By

controlling production, the state, or in some cases the community, also directs the distribution of goods and resources to ensure equity among all citizens. The goal of the system is to eventually gain a utopian society where all property is owned collectively, and labor and capital are shared uniformly among the members of society. To its proponents, socialism is the antithesis of capitalism, which they believe wrongly values competition and profit over cooperation and social service (Henderson 2002). Modern socialism was conceived due to the struggles of laborers during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century Industrial Revolution, and was famously championed by the philosophers Marx and Engels. It survives today in varying forms. One of the most common modern structures is *social democracy*, in which socialist leaders are democratically elected to office, actively participate in government, and, subsequently, through democratic processes, enact socialist reforms. It should be noted that in Marxist theory, socialism is the intermediate stage between capitalism and communism (Henderson 2002). It is also prudent to observe that this type of government is prevalent in South America, this paper's area of study, and in Central America, where poverty is high and the distribution of wealth is significantly skewed towards the so-called oligarchs (Buckman 2004).

Background and History of Venezuela

Two other important factors requiring discussion are the background and history of the Republic of Venezuela. Venezuela is geographically located in the north central portion of South America. It is bordered to the east by Guyana, to the southeast by Brazil, to the west by strong U.S. ally Colombia, and to the north by the Caribbean Sea. The population of over twenty-seven million is predominately *mulatto-mestizo*, which is

a mixture of European, African, and native Indian ancestry, and is largely Roman Catholic. The annual gross domestic product is about \$128 billion, generated from the chief commercial products of petroleum; aluminum, alumina, and bauxite; agricultural products; and small manufactured products (Buckman 2004). It is important to note that Venezuela is the fourth largest supplier of crude oil to the U.S., with an average daily export of 1.2 million barrels per day. Only Canada, Saudi Arabia, and Mexico export more petroleum to the U.S., with averages of 2.5 million, 1.6 million, and 1.3 million barrels per day, respectively (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2008). Consequently, Venezuela, which boasts the world's largest oil reserves outside the Middle East (Starr 2007), is of great strategic importance to the U.S. due to America's burgeoning dependence on imported oil.

Venezuela was a Spanish protectorate from 1498 through 1811. On July 5, 1811, the colony declared independence from Spain, and in 1819, after fighting a long, bloody revolution led by the legendary Simon Bolivar, the nation became a part of a new independent country named the Republic of Gran Colombia. Gran Colombia was comprised of present-day Venezuela, Ecuador, and Colombia. In 1830, the country was dissolved and Venezuela became an autonomous state. Until 1935, Venezuela suffered through a number of repressive authoritarian regimes. From 1935 through 1947, a series of more moderate, but ineffective leaders ruled. However, during this period, political parties were allowed to become active, which signaled the beginning of a fledgling democracy. Unfortunately, in 1947 a military coup ousted the democratically elected president and established another authoritarian government. By late 1957, the citizens of Venezuela were disillusioned by the dictatorship and began to resist. In a

sign of solidarity with the citizens, the military refused to support the despot, General Marcos Perez Jimenez, and he fled the country in early 1958. By December of that year, a free presidential election was held with three moderate political parties supporting candidates. Since then, the reemergence of free elections has lasted through nine successive administrations (Buckman 2004). Nevertheless, McCoy writes that despite the country's massive oil wealth, "Venezuelans for the past quarter-century have had to contend with growing poverty, the pains of adjusting to globalization, rising alienation from political parties, and issues raised by growing mobilization among those left on society's margins" (2005). These, coupled with high unemployment and a swelling crime rate, caused growing dissatisfaction among the general population of Venezuela.

Development of Chavez's Ideology

The ideology espoused by Hugo Chavez is deeply rooted in his childhood, was refined as a university student and young military officer, and is ultimately guided by his adoration of Simon Bolivar, the nineteenth century Venezuelan revolutionary. Chavez, the second son of two school teachers, was born on July 28, 1954 in a mud and straw hut with a palm roof and dirt floor owned by his grandmother. The primitive dwelling, with no running water or electricity, was located in the rustic village of Sabaneta on the *los llanos*, a vast, but sparsely populated grassy marshland. At a young age, due to the modest means of his family, Chavez and his older brother went to live permanently with their grandmother. While there they attended school and pursued hobbies such as singing, painting, and *el juego de pelota* (baseball). At school and in the village streets on the weekends, Chavez sold candies his grandmother made to help his family survive

(Marcano and Tyszka 2007). Much to the displeasure of his parents, at the age of seventeen Chavez applied for matriculation into the prestigious Venezuelan Academy of Military Sciences. He chose the military academy rather than the university his parents preferred mainly because it was located in Caracas where his favorite professional baseball team played. He felt it would be a good location for him to transition from the role of college student to professional baseball player (Marcano and Tyszka 2007). Due to his exceptional pitching skills and satisfactory academic acumen, Chavez was admitted to the academy. During his studies, he developed a significant interest in learning more about Bolivar and other South American activists, and his dream of playing professional baseball eventually diminished. These educational pursuits, coupled with his trips to the sewage infested slums of Caracas, created a new passion within Chavez: to transform Venezuela. It was at this time that Chavez also gained a keen interest in the leftist military regimes of Latin America (Marcano and Tyszka 2007). According to Jones, "In Chavez's view, Bolivar had laid down the outlines of a formidable national project for Latin America. Zamora took up that project a quarter century after Bolivar's death, and Chavez – at least in his mind – was to inherit it in the late twentieth century" (2007). Chavez graduated from the academy in 1975 and was commissioned a second lieutenant. After serving in the military for only a short time, he saw how alleged insurgents were poorly treated and physically abused, and was appalled at the profound despair of the majority poor. This caused Chavez to start having significant doubts about the Venezuelan system of government. In 1977, at the age of twenty-three, Chavez took his first real step towards the left by forming a subversive cell called the *Venezuelan People's Liberation Army*, abbreviated ELPV in

Spanish, comprised of several like-minded soldiers. The group had no formal doctrine or plan of attack, but clandestinely cached a few hand grenades for possible use in a future revolt. Although the ELPV did not last long, it marked Chavez first overt act of rebellion (Jones 2007).

By December of 1982, Chavez finally decided it was time for further positive action to resolve the issues plaguing his country. Together with trusted fellow officers, Chavez created the *Bolivarian Revolutionary Army - 200*, or EBR-200, which was inspired by the legendary insurgent heroes *Ezequiel Zamora*, the fighter; Simon *Bolivar*, the leader; and Simon *Rodriguez*, the teacher. The organization was later renamed the *Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement – 200*, MBR-200, to recognize the acceptance of civilians into the conspiracy. At this time, Chavez was also secretly conferring with members of the local communist party. Because the two groups had vastly different views, Chavez kept his association with one group a secret from the other, as well as from the military, which essentially required him to live a covert triple life. Although his treasonous acts were nearly discovered by his military superiors a number of times, Chavez continued his secretive subversive planning and military and civilian recruitment for his clandestine organization for the next ten years (Jones 2007).

Becoming President

There were many events and incremental steps over several years that lead Hugo Chavez to the seat of power in Venezuela. One was his assignment in 1988 to a military post in the capitol, Caracas. While there he was able to secretly increase recruiting efforts for his covert organization and make more plans for his revolution. In December of the same year, Carlos Andres Perez was elected president. Perez

inherited a debt-ridden government that was on the brink of financial collapse. To remedy the situation, he announced a plan, *El Gran Virage*, designed to return Venezuela to the prosperity achieved earlier during the oil boom. According to Jones, “The plan was simple: Short-term pain to correct ‘economic imbalances’ would lead to long-term prosperity” (2007). The strategy, which included extreme increases in the price of bread, milk, pasta, and other subsidized foods, went into effect on February 25, 1989. Almost immediately, the country started suffering from food shortages and there were some isolated food riots throughout the country. Later in the month, the plan directed doubling the price of fuel, while only allowing a partial increase in the charges for mass transit. Unexpectedly, the owners of the transportation companies did not abide by the provision and steadily increased their fares. This, in turn, led to widespread riots and massive looting, which threw the country into gridlock. To stop the pandemonium, Perez declared martial law, imposed a curfew, and suspended the constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and assembly. The government then sent in federal troops to quell the insurrection. Unfortunately, the military used “indiscriminate repression” against violators of the curfew and over a three day period the worst modern-day massacre in Venezuelan history transpired. When the incident was all over on March 4, twenty-nine hundred companies were looted and burned, business lost an estimated \$1.5 billion, and worst of all, nearly four hundred people were dead. Although he was stationed in Caracas, the nucleus of the chaos, Chavez did not participate on either side of the melee because he was bedridden with chicken pox; however, the events had a profound impact on him and he resolved that he would take action (Jones 2007). About this, Chavez said, “When Carlos Andres Perez sent

the Armed Forces into the streets to repress that social uprising and there was a massacre, the members of the MBR-200 realized we had passed the point of no return and we had to take up arms.” He further stated, “We discussed how to break free of the past, how to move beyond the kind of democracy that only responded to the interests of the oligarchy ...” (Chavez and Harnecker 2005). Chavez and his fellow conspirators decided not to act immediately, but within weeks were plotting their first coup attempt, code named Plan Ezequiel Zamora (Jones 2007).

By February 1992, Chavez was the commander of an elite paratrooper battalion and decided the time for his revolution had come. About the situation at the time, Chavez said, “Venezuela was suffering a terminal crisis, ruled by a dictatorship dressed in democratic clothing, a dictatorship that took a people living on a sea of oil, with huge navigable rivers and millions of acres of agricultural land, to abject poverty and limitless political and moral corruption” (Jones 2007). By then, he and his underground group, the MBR-200, had completed their secret plan to unseat Perez. On February 4, the group, conspicuously missing the civilian component, commenced their planned putsch using regular military troops. Remarkably, the vast majority of the soldiers were told they were going on a field training exercise and initially had no idea they were about to initiate a rebellion. After eighteen deaths and sixty other casualties, the plan unraveled and Chavez was forced to surrender. In a move that would eventually haunt them, the Perez administration foolishly allowed the charismatic Chavez, jauntily wearing his trademark red beret and combat fatigues, to appear live on national television to order his remaining forces to capitulate. In his statement, Chavez said, “Compañeros: Unfortunately, *for now*, the objectives we established in the capital were not achieved.

That means we, here in Caracas, did not succeed in taking control [of the government]. You did an excellent job out there, but it is now time to avoid more bloodshed, it is now time to reflect ... lay down your weapons.” He closed his dramatic appearance by pronouncing, “I assume responsibility for this Bolivarian military movement” (Marcano and Tyszka 2007). The “for now” comment greatly strengthened the resolve of other revolutionaries because it signaled that the cause was not lost forever. The acceptance of blame for the failure, extremely uncommon in Latin American politics, endeared him to the masses. The formerly unknown Army lieutenant colonel was immediately catapulted into national celebrity. That notwithstanding, Chavez was subsequently convicted in a court martial for treason and sentenced to prison. Nevertheless, he remained a hero to many citizens and scores of admirers from Venezuela and abroad visited him while he was incarcerated (Jones 2007).

Two years and two months later, Chavez was granted a pardon and made the transition from disgraced military officer to politician. He revived his revolutionary plan by founding the *Movement of the Fifth Republic*, MVR, which was a political party rather than a group of coup d'état conspirators. This group was later disbanded and replaced with the *United Socialist Party of Venezuela* (Jones 2007). At first, Chavez began a “crusade to get people to abstain from voting, arguing the system was ‘fraudulent, illegal, and illegitimate’” (Marcano and Tyszka 2007). However, after about two years of spreading his message across the country one village at a time, he was convinced by advisors that this tactic was counter-productive. As a result, Chavez decided to become a legitimate candidate for the office of president. Finally, in 1998, after conducting an exhausting grassroots campaign against popular rivals, Chavez was elected president

of Venezuela by a large margin. He was reelected again in 2000 and 2006 after changing the constitution to allow for six-year presidential terms. His current tenure ends in 2012 (Jones 2007).

Chavez's presidency has not been without national controversy. As a matter of fact, since his first selection there have been a number of organized efforts to remove him from office. These include multiple mass public demonstrations calling for his resignation, a short-lived coup in April 2002, an effort to obtain a non-binding recall referendum, a drive for a constitutional amendment in order to force early elections, a months-long protest by leading military officers, a lengthy strike by oil workers, and a failed recall election in 2004 (McCoy 2005). Although these events have set Chavez's Bolivarian agenda back, he continues to believe Venezuela is finally making revolutionary progress. About this, he has said, "Now, I am sure that we are on the right path. How many more years will it take? If it is about throwing out a date, I would say we will reach the end of this process in 2021. Maybe earlier" (Chavez and Harnecker 2005).

Changing Venezuela's Course

Since winning the presidential election in 1998, Hugo Chavez has made a number of sweeping changes not only in governmental systems, but also in society and industry. According to McCoy, these changes were motivated by Chavez's great desire to move forward with his planned Bolivarian Revolution by "giving the government more direct control over the investment and spending of oil income; by asserting more positive control over government institutions; and by providing ways for citizens to participate directly in politics through referenda as well as community organizations and social

programs.” Although the goals of the revolution have not been fully articulated, McCoy has deduced that they include the following: creation of a new governing class; establishment of a new military model that embraces participation in civilian government; hastening a shift in political balance to mirror the majority status of the underprivileged; use of economic resources to benefit the poor, decrease income disparity, and assist the socially excluded; and pursue a nationalistic foreign policy (2005). To that end, Chavez has made a myriad of changes. For example, he has successfully reshaped Venezuela’s political landscape. Due to an ill-advised boycott of national elections by the opposition political parties, Chavez’s followers, commonly called *chavistas*, won a vast majority of seats in the National Assembly, Venezuela’s version of a parliament, and have retained them through the past several election cycles (Corrales and Penfold 2007). In addition, Chavez removed some powers held by the judiciary, then increased the total number of justices from twenty to thirty-two and installed his allies on the court, assuring him a majority (Marcano and Tyszka 2007). These political moves, which did not break any Venezuelan law, effectively made the opposition parties impotent and gave Chavez virtually unfettered control of the government. In addition, he changed the armed forces from a purely military organization to an instrument of social change. Through a number of social programs called *misiones*, the government has sent the military into poor communities to carry out Chavez’s socialist agenda. These programs include building schools and roads, organizing literacy programs, managing medical missions, initiating agricultural projects, and distributing food (Marcano and Tyszka 2007). While the programs are wildly popular among the indigent, they are widely criticized by others who claim they are

intended to “Cubanize” Venezuela (Jones 2007). Furthermore, Chavez has advanced his socialist reforms in the economic arena by nationalizing key industries and creating community cooperatives (de Cordoba and Lyons 2007). He has not stymied capitalism, but has bridled foreign companies, especially in the petroleum industry, by making them share a large portion on the profits they earn from Venezuela’s natural resources (Jones 2007). Moreover, Chavez has endeavored to rearrange the social structure of Venezuela, which he views as unjust and upside down. His goal is to empower the majority poor by shifting influence and resources away from the minority oligarchs. One of the means he has used to accomplish this is through the redistribution of government and foreign-owned arable land to landless farmers, who are subsidized for growing certain crops. He has also implemented programs to make it easier for the deprived to vote by strategically placing polling sites and encouraging mass participation (Jones 2007). In addition, Chavez has sought to change the country by improving the living standards of the average Venezuelan, many of whom live in squalor. This has partially been accomplished by building a number of collective housing projects outside the overcrowded cities. He has also constructed many new schools and medical facilities in poor neighborhoods, as well as building better roads and improving utilities (Marcano and Tyszka 2007). Finally, Chavez has taken a number of measures to make information, especially his message, more readily available to the average Venezuelan. In one program, using petrodollars, he has placed computers in many rural schools. After school hours, he encourages members of the community, who normally would not have access, to use these resources. He has also established state run newspapers and radio and television stations to counter what he terms “one-sided media coverage”

(Jones 2007). Furthermore, he created his own unscripted, hours-long television program, *Aló, Presidente* (Hello, President), in which he addresses problems telephoned in by ordinary citizens, provides information about ongoing government projects, interviews foreign and local guests, sings Venezuelan folk songs, and performs other acts that further endear him to the majority poor (Marcano and Tyszka 2007). In addition, in an internationally controversial move, Chavez denied renewal of the license of a highly popular opposition television station, RCTV, and has sought to rein in the media by enacting the *Law of Responsibility*, which controls programming and institutes standards for the proscription of certain content. The Chavez administration contends the law is aimed at curbing inappropriate and offensive programming during prime time viewing and preventing overt encouragement of sedition (Atwood 2006). Critics of this move call the edict a “gag law” intended to stifle the media, and cite it as another example of his authoritarian proclivity (Marcano and Tyszka 2007). In his defense, Chavez states, “We cannot remain quiet in the face of the private media campaign to poison the people’s outlook” (Chavez and Harnecker 2005).

Analysis

Analysis of Hugo Chavez’s presidency and the direction in which he is guiding Venezuela requires scrutiny of a number of key factors. First of all, it is no secret that Chavez, who vociferously promotes an aggressive socialist agenda, has dedicated his greatest efforts to dissolving the gross disparity in distribution of wealth and eradicating the pervasive poverty among the majority of the populace. He has undoubtedly made some headway in this area. His use of petrodollars to fund programs to provide relief to

impoverished workers and the unemployed has been moderately successful (Cohen 2007). His efforts to regulate the banking, petroleum, telecommunication, and utilities industries have also helped the majority underprivileged population to some extent. Paradoxically, many of Chavez's programs have been directly compared to those of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's *New Deal*, which was the United States' effort to counter the effects of the Great Depression (Jones 2007). As with the FDR's New Deal, Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution has its detractors. Critics argue that his populist programs, while appearing to be noble, are only a limited, short term remedy. They further argue that the policies and plans perpetuate the current economic problems by continuing a welfare state that does not equate hard work with prosperity. In addition, many view the use of the armed forces in social programs as a "dangerous intrusion of the military into civilian life, opening the door to authoritarian rule," and damaging to "efforts to strengthen civilian and governmental institutions" (Jones 2007). On the other hand, they cannot truthfully claim that these actions, when examined in an unbiased manner, do not conform to basic democratic standards.

Unquestionably, Chavez has also drastically increased his personal power since taking office. Some view his control of all the branches of government as a blatant return to authoritarianism in a clear affront to democratic principles. They also cite his nationalism of industry, ruling by decree, and controlling the media as an overt power grab (Shifter 2006). However, even his harshest critics have to honestly admit that Chavez gained his presidency in what the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Carter Center termed a clean and transparent election (Jones 2007). In addition, his supporters in the National Assembly were democratically elected. Furthermore, he

did not violate the country's constitution when he manipulated the structure of the courts or when he rules by decree, a power freely granted to him by the assembly (Corrales and Penfold 2007). Although he may have used strong-arm political tactics behind the scenes, the record appears to indicate that Chavez's consolidation of power has been through purely democratic means.

In addition, Chavez has often used harsh, often insulting, rhetoric when discussing other democratic nations and their leaders, especially the United States. He imprudently made a number of derisive comments about U.S. President George W. Bush, who Chavez referred to as "the devil" when he spoke to the U.N. General Assembly in New York in September 2006 (Jones 2007). Even some of Chavez's staunchest allies recognized he had crossed the line and repudiated him. Chavez has also often disparaged the U.S. for past acts in Latin America, including the "dirty wars," and angrily derides America's "imperialist" penchant, claiming the U.S. played a covert role in the 2002 coup attempt against him. In addition, he claims that the U.S. continues to improperly meddle in other Latin American affairs. Furthermore, Chavez has publicly denounced the U.S. for engaging in an "illegal war" in Iraq and killing innocents, which clearly inflames tempers in this country (Jones 2007). Despite this, bilateral trade between the U.S. and Venezuela will reach about \$47 billion this year, mostly due to huge crude exports from the south to the north (Cohen 2007). While these pronouncements are clearly provocative and without diplomatic decorum, he uses them to gain popularity and further his agenda in his country and the rest of Latin America, but has taken no action regarding them. Again, while his methods are unseemly, they are not, by definition, undemocratic.

Another disturbing trait demonstrated by Chavez is his blatant collaboration with a number of the world's most iniquitous dictators. He has publicly flaunted his relationships with Iran and Cuba, and was the first national chief executive to meet with Saddam Hussein of Iraq after Operation Desert Storm while the country was under United Nations sanctions (Jones 2007). In another challenge to longstanding sanctions, Chavez notoriously completed trade agreements with Fidel Castro's Cuba. In addition, he's conducted meetings with radical leaders of Iran, including President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a vocal opponent of the United States and the west (Shifter 2006). Furthermore, Chavez has been infamously associated with the Marxist Colombian rebel group, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). As a matter of fact, after the recent assassination of rebel leader Raul Reyes, it was widely reported that the Colombian Army found computer documents that indicated Chavez may have supported the insurgents with \$300 million in aid (Barrionuevo 2008). The Venezuelan government, of course, denied any connection to the group. The Colombian and U.S. governments, both long suspicious of these ties, denounced Chavez for supporting the FARC, whose other primary source of funds is the lucrative drug trafficking trade. Although these acts rightly deserve criticism and call into question Chavez's intentions, they are not undemocratic, and, unfortunately, can be compared to actions the U.S. government has taken in the past.

It is no secret that corruption is rampant in Venezuela and most of Latin America. About this, Gould writes that Transparency International, a group that combats worldwide corruption, "ranks Venezuela as the least transparent country in Latin America and 162 out of 179 globally" (2007). In a concurring opinion, Coronel states

that corruption “now permeates all levels of Venezuelan society.” He further writes, “The dramatic rise in corruption under Chavez is ironic since he came to power largely on an anti-corruption platform” (2006). Chavez admits this failing by stating, “I realize we still have a long way to go on that issue, nothing remarkable has been accomplished in combating corruption, nothing that could be called substantial or defining” (Chavez and Harnecker 2005). On the other hand, it must be recognized that Chavez was elected in a free and fair democratic election. Even though he campaigned on an anti-corruption platform, and has been implicated in a few corruption-related incidents, it cannot be concluded that his failure in this area portends a withdrawal from democratic principles.

Conclusions

Hugo Chavez inherited a country with deep seated problems when he was elected in a landslide victory over nine years ago. The difficulties included widespread poverty, an enormous disparity in wealth distribution, a growing national debt, and a government riddled with corruption. On the positive side, Chavez also became heir to a nation with vast natural resources, including a huge store of petroleum that produced \$30 billion in exports in 2007 alone (Munoz 2007). The oil reserve, coupled with a number of countries, notably China and the U.S., willing to openly compete for the resource placed the new president in an enviable position. Based on his extreme popularity with *his people*, the indigent and disenfranchised, Chavez coasted to easy wins in several elections, was able to publish a new left-leaning constitution, and has democratically consolidated considerable political power, virtually ruling without checks and balances. Based on his socialist politics, autocratic activities, and fiery rhetoric, there are those

who believe Chavez is leading Venezuela down the path of communist Cuba (The Economist 2007). Others believe that Chavez has proved he supports democracy by holding democratic elections and abiding by the results, even when they are not in his favor. About this, O'Grady writes, since accepting the defeat of his constitutional amendments, some are now saying that Chavez has "proven his democratic bona fides" (2007). Of course, there are also those who stand somewhere in between Chavez's supporters and critics. In an opinion piece in the New York Times, the editors wrote, "Mr. Chavez remains, at least technically a democrat ... But his government's veneer of democratic respectability is wearing thin" (2007). After careful consideration of all these opinions and a thorough study of Chavez's actions as president of Venezuela, this paper concludes that the latter is the most accurate assessment. Chavez undoubtedly wants to rule, somewhat like an elected autocrat, for a lifetime. On the other hand, although he publicly vilifies those who oppose him, he has, so far, encouraged voting, held fair and transparent elections, complied with the decisions of the electorate, and has not imprisoned or otherwise harmed his opponents. This proves, for now, that Venezuela is still, in fact, a democratic country; not a model democracy by any means, but a democracy nevertheless. One must note, however, that the extent of Chavez's commitment to democratic principles will only become known for certain when his presidential term expires in 2012 and he voluntarily steps aside allowing his successor to take control of the Republic.

Works Cited

- Atwood, Roger. "Media Crackdown: Chavez and Censorship." Georgetown Journal of International Affairs 7, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 25-32.
- Barrionuevo, Alexei. "U.S. Studies Rebels' Data for Chavez Link: [Foreign Desk]." New York Times, March 14, 2008, Late Edition (East Coast).
- Buckman, Robert T. Latin America. 38th ed. The World Today Series. Harpers Ferry, WV: Stryker-Post Publications, 2004.
- Chavez, Hugo and Marta Harnecker. Understanding the Venezuelan Revolution. Translated by Chesa Boudin. New York, NY: Monthly Press Review, 2005.
- Cohen, Roger. "Shutting Up Venezuela's Chavez: [Op-Ed]." New York Times, November 29, 2007, Late Edition (East Coast).
- Coronel, Gustavo. "Corruption, Mismanagement, and Abuse of Power in Hugo Chavez's Venezuela". In Development Policy Analysis no. 2, November 27, 2006. By Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity, 2006.
- Corrales, Javier and Michael Penfold. "Venezuela: Crowding out the Opposition." Journal of Democracy 18, no. 2 (April 1, 2007): 99-IV.
- de Cordoba' Jose and John Lyons. "Will Defeat Alter Chavez's Path?: Venezuela Leader's Failure To Cement Power Expected To Embolden Opposition." Wall Street Journal, December 4, 2007, Eastern Edition.
- Gould, Jens Erik. "Venezuela's Fateful Choice." New York Times, November 30, 2007, Late Addition (East Coast).
- Henderson, David R., ed. The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2002. S.v. "Socialism" by Robert Heilbroner.
- Jones, Bart. Hugo! The Hugo Chavez Story from Mud Hut to Perpetual Revolution. Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2007.
- Levinson, Martin H. "Democracy Here is Not Necessarily Democracy There." et Cetera 63, no. 2 (April 1, 2006): 215-216.
- Marcano, Cristina and Alberto Barrera Tyszka. Hugo Chavez: The Definitive Biography of Venezuela's Controversial President. New York, NY: Random House, 2007.
- McCoy, Jennifer. "One Act in an Unfinished Drama." Journal of Democracy 16, no. 1(January 1, 2005): 109-123.
- Munoz, Sergio. "Hugo Chavez -- Mouth or Menace?: Despite His Anti-U.S. Rhetoric and Ambitions, The Only Country That Venezuela's President Really Threatens is His Own." Los Angeles Times, December 2, 2007.

O'Grady, Mary Anastasia. "Americas: Showdown at Fort Tiuna." Wall Street Journal, December 10, 2007, Eastern Edition.

Shifter, Michael. "In Search of Hugo Chavez." Foreign Affairs 85, no. 3 (May 1, 2006): 45.

Starr, Alexandra. "Living Large on Oil." The American Scholar 76, no. 2 (April 1, 2007):7-12.

"The Americas: Are They Beginning to Lose the Faith?; Venezuela." The Economist, December 1, 2007, 64.

United Nations Development Programme, Democracy in Latin America: Towards a Citizens' Democracy. 1a Edition, Buenos Aires: Aguilar, Altea, Taurus, Alfaguara, 2004.

United States Energy Information Administration. Crude Oil and Total Petroleum Imports Top 15 Countries, February 2008. 20 April 2008. <http://www.eia.doe.gov>.

